

**The Untold Stories of the Demised: Eschatological Narratives in Ahmed Yerima's *Tafida and Other Plays***

By

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University of Calabar, Calabar.[josephatodeys@gmail.com](mailto:josephatodeys@gmail.com), [patrickogar245@gmail.com](mailto:patrickogar245@gmail.com), [cypriansam@2025gmail.com](mailto:cypriansam@2025gmail.com)**Abstract**

The “The Untold Stories of the Demised in Ahmed Yerima’s *Tafida and Other Plays*” unlocks the mysteries surrounding the existence of the dead in the realm of the spirit. In African tradition, the dead as assumed by the living are not totally alienated from the discourse of the living. Recent research has shown that little or no research has been done on the activities of those in the realm of the spirits using the selected play texts. Thus, this research fills that gap created by scholarship. This paper adopts a textual approach to ascertain the veracity of the claim that the dead do not have eyes and ears to see and hear. This research is guided by the trauma theory and unfolds the wounds and pains associated with the demise of loved ones. The lacuna created by the deceased necessitated this research. The research finds out that the dead are active participants in the affairs of the living and concludes that the dead see themselves as stakeholders of unity in diversity.

**Keywords:** Untold Stories, Demised, Tradition, Spirit realm, Trauma theory, Eschatological**Introduction**

The cosmos is filled with unseen forces that only those that are blessed by the spirit can see, especially in the interplays of powers. The demised in this context are those who have been forcibly transported to an unknown place (spiritual realm). This is why African tradition negates the fact that death is an end point of the living but a performative journey that humans must embark upon to complete the cycle of existence. Ezebuilo (2010) states that

Death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed by moves to live in the spirit of the ancestors’ realm. This meaning attached to death is consistent with Africa’s cultural, historical, epistemological and methodological conceptions of being-in-the-world, are (sic) premised on these dimensions (p.116)

It is the lived experience that the demised interrogate in the metaphysical world. Baloyi and Maobe Rbothata (2014) affirm that “no measure of imported experience can ever be authentic, unless it is constructed and interpreted from within the context of the lived experiences of the recipient” (p. 23). Dogmatic theology lays bare the destination of the dead: hell, or heaven to face judgement. The spiritual realm is loaded with activities that only the demised are active participants. Though their aspirations and cravings are dashed in the world of the living, they still bond with the living in multifaceted ways as Mbiti (1990) rightly observes “The spiritual presence in the affairs of the living or becoming a member in the

company of the spirits... is considered to be in a state of personal immortality” (p.22). In their immortal state, they confront their ordeals with verve and vigour as seen in Ahmed Yerima’s *Tafida and Other Plays*.

In African traditional system, the ability to uphold tradition is given primacy. As argued by Egbung and Akpagu (2019) “identity is an integral part of culture, and there are several things that give one an identity” (p.2). Thus, it is believed that the participation of the demised in the affairs of the living is ever deemphasized. The precautionary roles appropriated by our ancestors envision them as vanguards of morality because they scold, caution and correct debasing anomalies bestriding the world of the living and the dead. The dead are harbingers of many unseen forces hovering over the sensibilities of the living, especially, in performances like masquerade, ritual worship and marriage rites. The ancestors are always consulted through libation. This goes to reaffirm Mbiti’s (1969) position that “death is not a destruction of life, but a departure”. To Africans, death is not an end in itself but an obligatory function that the living must carry out in order to complete his or her cycle on earth.

From a western perspective, the assumption about the demised is that it is the final destination of man’s journey on earth. But in Africa, death is perceived as journey to the ethereal realms. Onwuatuegwu (2025) did not mince words when he asserted that “The journey into African cosmology offers a compelling alternative to western paradigms, revealing a worldview where death is not silence of the void but a doorway to a new and vital form of being within the ever-unfolding cosmic dance” (p.10). To natives, especially in the hinterlands of Africa, death is perceived as a transcendental or mystical journey of humans who have consciously or unconsciously completed their task on earth as dictated by the supernatural power (God). It is as a result of this mysterious disposition and the attendant orality contained therein that Yerima trails folk art and orality as he passionately portrays the teleological connectedness between the world of the living and the world of the dead

A cursory look at African tradition shows that the lives of the living are intricately woven with the passage of the demised. Philosophers in all spheres of our existence assume that there are certain criteria that must be met before dancing with the ancestors. Affirming this view, Wiredu (1992) states that

In West Africa, indeed, living a full and meaningful life is a condition for becoming an ancestor. This probably is not universally the case in Africa, but in view of some peoples, such as the Akan in Ghana, a person whose life is cut short by an accident or an unclean disease or any other untoward circumstances does not gain immediate access to the country of the dead; he becomes a neighborhood ghost, an occasional source of frightening apparitions, until he can come back again to try to work out a complete life (p.143).

African mythology is deeper, highly transcendental, spiritually inclined and has a systemic path about death, which is a transition to an unknown destination. Attoe (2023) has it that “The lifelessness of a corpse and the plausibility of materialism suggest that death implies a plunge into nothingness” (p.311). Attoe (2023) adds that, “...the loss of life in the physical world only liberates the individual from the limits of the body function and allows the individual to influence both the physical world and the spiritual world as a disembodied spirit or ancestor” (p.315). The participatory roles of the dead in the “other” world and the cosmic reality of our immediate environment is a mystery that Attoe vehemently emphasized. It is premised on this perceived postulation that Ahmed Yerima’s *Tafida and Other Stories* is interrogated.

Despite the prevailing situation in Africa especially Nigeria, Yerima chose to build his vision on the happenings permeating the sensibilities of Africans as may have occurred in most contemporary African societies. Critic and writers in most cultural tradition gets their inspiration from the pre-historic era to enlighten the younger generation on the place of the ancestors in the affairs of the living. Corroborating this view Odey & Ogar (2025) assert that “For a work art to be sustainable, it must portray the historical antecedents because it is in the cultural domain that a writer of a work of arts draws his or her inspiration”

(p.2012). As a playwright, Yerima chose to build his vision on the traditional experiences of the past and as it appeared modified in our contemporary society.

### **Methodology**

This research deploys a qualitative research approach with particular emphasis on African mythology about death as represented in Ahmed Yerima's *Tafida and Other Plays*. The play gives an insight into the activities of the dead in the "other" world. Also, scholarly and critical works like journals, articles and internet sources were consulted to further consolidate on this research. The paper is text-based research with some stylistic techniques deployed by the writer to foreground the mysteries surrounding the inevitability of death in the society.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The paper adopts Trauma theory as the basic theoretical framework. The theory emphasizes the vision of Yerima as implicated in the plays. Trauma has to do with the pain, wound and predicament that people go through in the face of an existential threat, like death. Trauma in Caruth's perspective is an unending predicament of the unconscious minds in the cosmos. Azmi (2018) states that trauma theory as "A theoretical trend was introduced by scholars like Cathy Caruth, who pioneered a psychoanalytic post-structural approach that suggests trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language" (p.58). The pain that goes with the demise of loved ones is associated with trauma. Cathy Caruth holds that

To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event. Insufficiently grasped at its time of occurrence, trauma does not lie in the possession of the individual, to be recounted at will, but rather acts as a haunting or processing influence which not only insistently and intrusively returns but is moreover experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition (qtd in Sidhique P & Abdul M. A. 2018, p.327).

The position of Caruth's trauma permeates the sensibility of individuals who are caught in what Sigmund Freud describes elsewhere as "Traumatic Neurosis". In a tumultuous space like African tradition, the interconnectedness of trauma should not be deemphasized. Caruth (1995) avers that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures" (p.11). In the same vein, Abubakar (2017) adumbrates that "In literary studies, some narratives with traumatic themes, moods and tones are eminent in keeping alive a psychological wound alongside telling others the pains in a traumatic experience" (p.120). It is these pains and emotional wounds that Yerima interrogates in *Tafida and Other Plays*.

### **Eschatology Narratives on the Untold Stories of the Demised in Yerima's *Tafida and Other Plays***

The inevitability of death in the African society has left so much to be desired. The living sees the dead as the vanguard of the spiritual space and are respected and remembered in the traditional space as well as in the religious circle. The persistent bonding between the living and the ancestors has significantly shaped our daily activities in manifold ways. Evidently, death plays an important role in the socio-cultural and socio-religious domains, especially in the lives of the Africans in the pre-historic era and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as explained by Mbiti (1970) who holds that "The appearance of the departed and his being recognized by name, may continue for up to four to five generations..." (p.32). It is premised on this perceived notion about the dead and their roles in the affairs of the living that Nnorugo (2024) states:

One of the earlier notions of death in African worldview is that most deaths are caused by one thing or the other; either by bad people or by bad spirit or belief that the person has committed or breached natural law or moral law against the land/gods thereby disrupting the cosmic balance in the land of the dead and the land of the living (p.157).

*Tafida and other Plays* is a dramatization of death after life and the spiritual implications that it carries with it are multifaceted. Umokoro (2010) did not mince words when he states that “Divinely sanctioned death is both holy and natural, attracting full burial rites. Unnatural death may be accidental, homicidal or suicidal, and subject to a variety of sanctions and reparation, depending on the degree of impurity or contamination” (p.54). It is because of this perceived scenario that Africans feel the existence of people even after their demise, a situation that can lead to trauma. Expanding on the place of trauma, Sidhique P and Abdul Mohammed Ali Jinnah (2018) aver that

Trauma can result from constellation of life experiences as well as from discreet happenings, a persisting condition or from an acute event. The stresses of such extraordinary catastrophic experiences shatter the individual’s emotional senses and finds repercussions in one’s behavioural patterns as a set of conscious and unconscious actions that limit the ability to act or respond appropriately (p.326).

These categories of people are not given smooth passage to the ethereal realm because they do not exit the world peacefully. Deaths arising from child birth, suicide and disgusting diseases are necessary evil that are abhorred in African culture. In such a case, the people are “treated and subjected to prescribed expiation at the end of the spiritual exile” (Umokoro 2010, p.54).

In *Tafida*, dead people are portrayed in a different world discussing and narrating their ordeals on earth in their sojourn. Lamentation, regrets and praises take the most part of their discourse as Tafida speaks even in death: “Oh God, give me a light in my heart. A light in my grave. A light in my ear. A light in my eye. A light in my hair. A light in my skin. A light in my flesh. A light in my bone. A light before me. A light behind me... (p. 13).

In African traditional belief, the dead are seers and active participants in the affairs of the living. This proposition is opposed to the position of the Bible which says that “You (will) return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. From dust you came and to dust you will return.” (Genesis, 3:19). But Yerima has debunked the position of dogmatic theology evidenced in the discourse between Tafida and Mutawalli who happens to be the former’s father in the spirit realm.

**TAFIDA:** I did not have to die.

**MUTAWALLI:** All things are ordained by Allah. Let it go, son

**TAFIDA:** Who do I tell I did not have to die? There was so much to do... We wanted

to...I wanted to... (*Tafida* 2013, p. 14)

The conversation is an overt declaration that the dead lament, talk and are traumatized because of the manner which they were laid off from the world by the forces that be. Tafida narrates his ordeals to his father. Tafida represents Shehu Musa Yar’ Adua who struggled to make the country better but all efforts could not come to fruition because of the resurgence of the inept and bad leadership as Tafida rightly observes in the afterlife.

**TAFIDA:** ...Now I am strong and cannot afford to see Nigeria degenerating to a level that would bring to naught all efforts in prosecuting the war and in development, and in fact, the efforts of our forefathers... (*Tafida*, p.24).

The belief in the afterlife and the mythical reading of the lives of the dead is what Yerima opts to enunciate in the play. The myth of the deaths is given so many interpretations in African tradition; but the meeting point is that dead people dialogue as normal humans in our existential space. This gives fervent reasons

why a mortician is said to always knock on the door of a morgue before gaining access and why libations are poured and gin drunk before corpses are carried and given a normal burial rite in some African societies.

African tradition berates in strong terms untimely death necessitated by witchcraft and death during childbirth. Most communities see this as an inherited curse that should be discarded. Ifie (1994) gives us an insight into one dimension of untimely death when he asserts that

Death during pregnancy is regarded as the most fearful and, on religious terms, most unholy. A woman who dies during pregnancy is eternally doomed, for her name ceases to be mentioned. She earns the nickname of the woman ‘who lost her canoe with all yams in it.’ “The woman” becomes her name. There are no prescribed rituals to bring her back to the fold of the holy departed. The woman who dies at childbirth is treated with greater leniency and is not condemned eternally (pg175-176).

The natives in African society have polarized opinion about the demised. This is why they always consult and seek protection from the ancestors when embarking on dangerous missions like animal hunting and wars. The vengeance of the dead is often felt by the living in various ways, especially when such victims are perceived to be killed by members of the society. These persons hover around until justice is dished out to the perpetrators of such crime.

In *The Sacred Mutter*, Olori Abike who happens to be the mother of the king is raped and subjected to a demeaning situation until she passed on. The spirit of the mad woman keeps hunting the king until his eventual dethronement. Balogun addresses the king in this manner:

I am sorry, Kabiyesi. Remember you are a king. No tears. You only deal with the living. The dead are strange to you... They left early this morning. The women had met last night, and felt they should find out the cause of all the problems in the village. The uncanny way Olori Abike died disturbed them (*The Sacred Mutter*, p. 76)

The spirit of Atinuke did not rest until Adekanbi is punished as Balogun asserts “the village has gone... with trouble. The birds refuse to sing like birds. Even the rats refuse to chirp like rats. Events of the past few days have not been seen or heard of in years. The youths are restless...” (p. 77). The spirit of the dead in collaboration with the gods normally preside in the affairs of the living by passing judgement as seen in the case of the king. It is against this backdrop that Abore has this to say

... Kabiyesi the Oluawo said that the gods are angry. And to appease them, the blood of the prince must be shed. The land must reject him, and all his properties burnt even before he is buried. And for seventeen years, no mention of his name must be made in the village (*The Sacred Mutter*, 80)

This play is an allusion to what is happening in our political space because of the lust and inordinate quest for power. Yerima rightly observes in his authorial comments that the “...political actions propelled by lust, are often costly for us” (Yerima, 2010, p.35). The play is a metaphor of what is happening in Nigeria’s post-independence era where elites usurp political positions by killing and engaging in dubious practices; prevalence of religious and ethnic feuds and resistance on the part of the youths. The character of Adekanbi is reflective of our political elites. The gods/tradition and the youth’s uprising are metaphors of situations in the country.

What is happening among the living in traditional African perspective is assumed to have been played in the spiritual realm. According to Baloyi and Malebogeng-Rabothata (2014) “The spirit of the living dead is embodied in this cosmic unity. The spirit is therefore a member of life forces that constitute the wholeness of the cosmic unity” (p.232). Baloyi and Malebogeng-Rabothata further affirm that “For traditional Africans, the living dead are an inseparable and influential part of their being. It is for this reason that

when Africans perform rituals by the grave side, for example, they do not refer to connecting with the dead person's spirit" (p. 236). This is what persists in most African societies. The dead always communicate with the living in different ways.

The assumption that the dead speak, dialogue and engage in gestural and facial movement is vividly exposed in Yerima's *Requiem*. Chinagorom snuffed life out of Dede, the Chief, because of his desire to become a chief. A son kills his father because he tells him that he is not qualified for the throne. After he was killed, his father's spirit refused to rest, which also buttresses the fact that the dead are real observers of the happenings in the cosmos as Nchomwa discusses with her ambitious son

The Chiefs sent for me. In fact, they summoned all the wives of your late father. It is not a good night. Your father died, but refuses to join his ancestors. Climb the Iroko tree to the other side. He holds on the branches of tree, as if he has one more task to perform (*Requiem*, p.107).

Nchomwa avers that the Chief/Eze "...has appeared to three people, two men and a woman, holding onto his neck as if he was strangled to death" (p.107). The appearance of the dead is proof that the dead are real observers of happenings in the society. Ezebuilo (2010) speaks in the same vein when he states that "Death is a natural transition from the visible to the invisible ontology where the spirit, the essence of the person, is not destroyed but moves to live in the ... ancestors' realm." (p.116). Onwuatuegwu (2025) concludes that

African unitary conception of reality, death and life are not considered as two separate opposing phases. Instead, there is a harmonious and interdependent coexistence between these two life forces. Dying is not viewed as an end but as a transcendence into further processes of development, inseparable from the stages of life development. African cosmology posits dying as a remarkable transition into a distinct phase of being, a shift in form and location within the continuous flow of existence (p.10).

Yerima has shown in his collections the harmonious relationship that exists between the living and the dead. There are checks and balances in all these spaces where the ancestors represent the spiritual realm while the living are the moral conscience of the physical world. But punitive measures are often meted to deviant members in the society evidenced in the tragedy that befalls Adekanbi and Chinagorom in *The Sacred Mutter* and *Requiem* respectively. Even women and men who indulged in dangerous practices could not escape the wrath of the gods, who by extension are the ancestors. It is against this backdrop that Okeke (2015) avers that

The people believe that the dead have supernatural powers and for this reason, they prepare for death. They do this by ensuring that they live exemplary lives so that when they die, they would be accorded a befitting burial, and so, join the ancestors since these are among the qualities for ancestorship (p.3).

But the submission of Nchomwa has shown that the dead talk, act and see: "I was the only woman his ghost appeared to. When he came to me, he had tears in his eyes. Now wrapped up in white chalk, I could see the mark of the strangler on his neck. You killed him, Son" (*Requiem*, 110).

In another incident, Nchomwa referring to the behaviour of the dead King in this manner: "Not in so many words. He pointed at his neck, and my womb, and in bloodshot eyes, he stared until I could see you strangle him... (*Requiem*, 110). Nchomwa concludes that "Just you, I and a ghost with us the living, the secret is just words. But it is the ghost that I fear. A ghost seething with anger is one whose strings of control are cut to this world" (*Requiem*, p.111). Venerations and reverences are accorded the dead to

appease the embers of anger among the people. This shows that they still remain indigenous members of African cosmology with their own mannerisms or innate idiosyncrasies.

In African traditional spaces, the belief in natural death is a far cry. In our communities, the demise of close people is often attributed to witchcraft and conspiracy by members of the family. In most cases, the aged and the sick are victims of this belief and allegation. Yerima weaves into his plays the impression of witches and other mythological deeds prevalent in the trilogy. Chukwuedo and Ede (2019) observe that

...sorcery, witchcraft and evil magic cause death. Therefore, when someone has died, people often try to find out who used sorcery, witchcraft or magic against the dead person. Someone is often blamed for it, and in some cases the suspect may be beaten to death, fined or thrown out of the community (p. 95)

Corroborating this view, Umokoro (2010) states that "...witches and wizards constitute a powerful group of supernatural beings, capable of affecting a man's fortune for good or ill" (p. 63). Witches in African tradition are known for their significant roles in the world of the spirit. The women are often erroneously adjudged to be suspected witches as Kobo and Odey (2025) hold that "...the image of the women continues to assume more pejorative and precarious looks in male written novel" (p.182). This is why the women are subjected to varying dehumanizing practices like widowhood rites and this often makes them agitated and angry. Okon (2012) affirms that "Witchcraft is a constant problem in Africa. Africans of all classes, poor and rich, illiterate and the educated classes all have one or two bad experiences to say about witchcraft as a nefarious and destructive spirit that is hindering human and social development in the continent." (p. 68). It is as a result of this that Ogar and Odey (2025) aver that "These disgruntled people are agitating...in the country in which resolution on division is still a far cry" (p.354).

The women happen to be victims of circumstances not taking into consideration the place of dissenting voices in the society. "As a result of these dissenting voices, the fates of the people are still hanging in a balance" (Ogar & Odey, 2025). In *The Sacred Mutter*, Atinuke is ascribed so many derogatory names like a witch, mad woman and expendable because she is a woman. Abese observes "she is the sacrifice for our offering. That is all that matters now!" (*The Sacred Mutter*, 47). It is against this backdrop that Masenya (2003) argues that

Women's sexuality is often defined and controlled by men both in the church and in the households. Female bodies become sacrifices at the altars of male power and pleasure. The level in which some societies understand women as sexual objects whose role is to satisfy men's sexual desire and never about how they (women) feel is problematic (p.102).

Nchomwa and the other wives of the chiefs were the first wives to be summoned on the demise of Dede, the king of the village. George-Franklin (2024) explains this summon in the following words: In some cultures, such as the Yoruba of Nigeria, it is believed that people can become witches through a spiritual process called "awon omo oko," which means "children of the bush." (p.100). In all, dead people are synonymous with witches in African tradition because they are all assumed to be spirits.

Yerima has shown in the play text that he has a grasp of the socio-cultural landscape of the society which is in the purview of most African writers. It is against this backdrop that Ogar and Odey (2021) assert that "Contemporary literary writers arguably see literary discourse as an avenue to engage political and socio-cultural issues particularly those that constitute discomfort to the masses" (p.76). The trauma that goes with the demise of loved ones and the fate of the dead are still a mystery that has not been effectively and efficiently unraveled.

## Conclusion

The paper examined the afterlife narratives of the dead in Ahmed Yerima's *Tafida and Other Plays*. The writer deployed literary devices like the foregrounding of the dead and orality that are steeped in African tradition to further enunciate the place of the dead in the world of the living. Killing a man in African tradition and not being caught are wishful thoughts that could barely come to fruition. It is believed that the dead play important roles in the affairs of the living. It recommended more research be conducted on the untold stories of the demised to ascertain the verisimilitude of the research deploying other theoretical frameworks. Also, the paper under study may be compared to other trauma related research to navigate frontiers in scholarship.

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